

# Hot Docs premiere Unclaimed finds a Vietnam veteran left behind for 44 years

Michael Jorgensen's *Unclaimed* reveals the amazing story of U.S. soldier John Hartley Robinson, declared dead in 1968.

---



/ UNCLAIMED

War veteran Tom Faunce visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. *Unclaimed* follows his quest to uncover the truth about a man living in Vietnam claiming to be American soldier John Hartley Robinson.

---

By: [Linda Barnard](#) Movies, Published on Thu Apr 25 2013

Special Forces Green Beret Master Sgt. [John Hartley Robertson](#) had forgotten how to speak English over the 44 years since he was left behind in the Vietnam War. But he never forgot that he was a father, husband and an American soldier, born in Alabama, shot down over [Laos](#) in a 1968 classified mission.

Had Hollywood told the story of the discovery of a long-forgotten soldier, found miraculously still alive in Vietnam after surviving a horrific helicopter attack and crash, it would have involved a dramatic and dangerous jungle rescue followed by a homecoming parade.

## **MORE ON THESTAR.COM**

[Hot Docs 2013: 16 movies reviewed](#)

[Hot Docs 2013 opens with Canadian strip club tale \*The Manor\*](#)

[Ten movies that show what happens when people stand up to the state](#)

Instead, in Emmy-winning Edmonton filmmaker [Michael Jorgensen](#)'s documentary *Unclaimed*, we meet a slightly stooped, wiry 76-year-old man living in a remote village in south-central Vietnam who trembles with frustration or pounds his forehead when he is unable to remember his birthday or his American

children's names. He is only able to speak Vietnamese.

*Unclaimed* has its world premiere at Toronto's 20th [Hot Docs](#) festival on April 30.

Robertson says he was confined to a bamboo cage in the jungle by North Vietnamese captors and, accused of being a CIA spy, was tortured for a year. Confused and badly injured, he was released and married the Vietnamese nurse who helped care for him. He assumed the name of her dead husband. They had children.

Jorgensen believes audiences in America, where "they don't hold anything higher than service to the country," will "lose their minds" when *Unclaimed* screens [at the G.I. Film Festival](#) in Washington, D.C., in May. "They'll come unglued."

But Jorgensen wanted this [Canadian production](#) to screen in his home country first.

The filmmaker came up against enough roadblocks from the military in the making of *Unclaimed* — especially when it came to contacting Robertson's family — to be convinced that, as one high-placed government source told him, "It's not that the Vietnamese won't let him (Robertson) go; it's that our government doesn't want him."

*Unclaimed* follows the dramatic quest of Vietnam vet Tom Faunce to prove that the man he was told about while on a 2008 humanitarian mission in Southeast Asia was indeed an Army "brother" who had been listed as killed in action and subsequently forgotten.

Faunce, a soft-spoken man who has suffered crushing loss and turmoil throughout his life, has devoted himself to helping the world's most desperate people. He was determined to make good on his vow to leave no man behind after serving two years in a war that divided America and made him feel like a pariah when he finally came home.

"Tom went to meet him (Robertson) and was very skeptical, grilled this guy up and down trying to get him to break, to say, 'Oh, no, I'm just making it up.' And he was adamant he was that guy," said Jorgensen, who was in Toronto to help host an invitation-only patrons' screening of *Unclaimed* at the [Hot Docs Bloor Cinema](#) two weeks ago and sat down for an exclusive interview with the Star.

Robertson's story seems unbelievable. And Jorgensen was equally skeptical when Faunce contacted him in 2012 about making a doc in the hope it would add muscle to his quest to reunite Robertson with his American family.

*Unclaimed* makes a compelling case. There is physical proof of Robertson's birthplace, collected in dramatic fashion onscreen; a tearful meeting in Vietnam with a soldier who was trained by Robertson in 1960 and said he knew him on sight; and a heart-wrenching reunion with his only surviving sister — 80-year-old Jean Robertson-Holly — in Edmonton in December 2012 that left the audience at the Toronto screening wiping away tears.

She had no idea her brother could still be alive.

"Jean says ... 'There's no question. I was certain it was him in the video, but when I held his head in my hands and looked in his eyes, there was no question that was my brother,'" says Jorgensen.

Onscreen, Robertson appears fretful and forgetful and clearly suffering from dementia. He has evidence of wounds and likely suffered debilitating brain injuries. Unravelling his story was a slow process.

“These memories pop out,” says Jorgensen. “I’ll give you an example that’s not in the movie. The minute he (Robertson) walks in that room in Edmonton, he knows it’s Jean. He says to Henry, her husband, ‘Oh, I remember, you worked in the drugstore.’”

Henry spent 50 years working as a pharmacist.

Jean and Henry suffered severe injuries in a car crash just days after the reunion and are still hospitalized. Earlier, they told Faunce they are determined “to do right by Johnny” and want answers about why he was left in Vietnam. So far, no officials have contacted Jean’s family.

As for Robertson, he is back in Vietnam and has no desire to leave, having fulfilled his one wish: to see his American family once more before he dies.

***Unclaimed*** screens at *Hot Docs* April 30, May 2 and May 4.